

TOP FLIGHT TAKE OFF



BERTRAND KIL, NPI

A Hercules flight by the South African airline, SAFAIR, took off from Cape Town on February 19: destination Antarctica. This was not in itself unusual – although there are no scheduled flights to the world's coldest, most windy and most remote continent, there are quite a few research stations in Antarctica. But this flight was far from the ordinary; on board ministers and deputy ministers of the environment, political advisers and climate experts, drawn from all over the world...

I have worked for the Norwegian Polar Institute for 11 years. As the person responsible for the Institute's communications and a media liaison, you might think I would have already visited the vast continent. But no. Up until 2005, Norway, one of the nations with the largest

TO ANTARCTICA.



A flight to the Antarctic earlier this year carried a very important cargo as GUNN SISSEL JAKLIN reports

STEIN TRONSTAD

territorial claim to the continent, only had limited summer activities in Antarctica. This changed after Queen Sonja inaugurated the new Troll Research Station, which now has six people spending the winter there, cut off from the rest of the world due to harsh weather conditions. And during summer, there is the Norwegian Antarctic Research Expedition. This year the summer activities included the Norwegian-US Scientific Traverse of East Antarctica – a major expedition during the International Polar Year 2008–2009.

And so, finally, I had a mission and a reason to go. Erik Solheim, Norwegian Minister for the Environment, had invited 11 of his colleagues to visit Troll, including Britain's Hilary Benn, as well as representatives from Algeria, Brazil, China, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, India, Indonesia, Papua

New Guinea, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, the USA, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the EU Commission. The objective was for them to get to know each other better, and learn about and discuss climate change issues prior to the COP15 climate summit, in Copenhagen in December. The idea was to gather in Cape Town after a United Nations Environment Programme meeting in Kenya, and then fly to Antarctica, together with Lord Nicholas Stern and Rajendra Pachauri.

Lord Stern was responsible for The Stern Review – an investigation for the British government into the possible effects of climate change on the world economy. Dr Pachauri is head of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) which, along with Al Gore, was

TOP Boarding the Hercules
ABOVE Looking down on Troll
LEFT Ministers take a photo call



FROM TOP

The Norwegian Troll base – situated at 72 degrees latitude and 02 degrees longitude, 1,275m above sea level

Britain's Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Hilary Benn, travels across the blue ice with India's adviser to the president, Shyam Saran and Norway's minister, Erik Solheim

Norwegian Polar Institute Director Jan-Gunnar Winther discusses climate change with ministers from the Czech Republic, Algeria and Norway

awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year. The ministers and experts would meet with the Traverse crew of scientists and technicians who would arrive at the base after two months on board heavy vehicles, making their way from the South Pole across the inner part of the icecap, to Troll. The previous season they had left from Troll and taken a more easterly route to the South Pole. The ministers would hear about climate change from the horse's mouth.

Some questioned the long flight – was it really necessary? The Norwegian minister was clear as ice: people learn far more from what they see and experience, than from what they are told. In view of the importance of a successful COP15, visiting Troll could only be positive. Indeed, the Norwegian Polar Institute can vouch for this, as a number of policymakers have visited the Arctic and Antarctica, including Hillary Clinton. We have observed that they have really appreciated the impact polar regions have on the world climate, and how these regions give signs of early warning.

So, here we were, in Cape Town, the starting point for Norwegian expeditions to Antarctica. Representatives of the Norwegian, British and US media had already arrived. When the ministers arrived, they seemed full of expectations. On the first evening, South Africa's minister welcomed the party to a country where rapid political changes have taken place, reminding us that it is possible to achieve a lot in a short period of time if only you set your mind and heart to it.

The next morning the Institute Director of Logistics had a message for us. It was not possible to fly to Troll. The airstrip constructed on the blue ice was open, but there was no alternative landing strip. And as you reach the point of no return during the flight, there has to be somewhere else to land should the weather suddenly turn bad. The only possible alternative is the Russian base, Novolazarevskaya, but there was a storm coming up and it was not safe. The ministers were speechless for a split second. But they decided to start the formal programme in Cape Town. Important messages were sent from Lord Stern and Dr Pachauri, and successful discussions were carried out.

The following day, the Logistics Director arrived with a stern face. Still bad weather at Novo. But finally the weather improved and most of us boarded the old Hercules. After nine hours we landed on the blue ice and climbed on board the open sledge, behind the heavy vehicle that would take us seven kilometres over

the ice to Troll. The scenery was breathtaking. In the meantime, the Traverse had arrived, and we had missed a spectacular sight when the crew at Troll welcomed them with banners and home-made Norwegian and American flags. "Tears came to my eyes," one of the Traverse technicians said. "I did not realise how much I had missed civilisation."

Calling Troll "civilisation", however, is a huge exaggeration. The nearest neighbour is 280 kilometres away. Antarctica's ice cap is 3.5 km thick, and 98 per cent of the continent is covered with snow and ice. But around Troll there are some nunataks (rocky peaks) emerging through the ice, and Troll is built on rock. There are even some birds in the vicinity.

The ministers were very interested guests indeed. They were shown around the facilities, where various scientific measurements are carried out. They learned about eco-toxins brought to the continent by air currents, about meteorological data being downloaded from satellites, and about how limited our knowledge of the climate system is and how important it is to scientifically investigate the polar regions. Are the eastern parts of Antarctica warming up, or are they getting colder? Antarctic ice accounts for 91.8 per cent of the world's land ice. If one per cent of it were to melt, the world's oceans would rise approximately 65 centimetres.

Science helps us understand the climate system better and thereby enlightens us as to what changes may occur and how to mitigate the effects. The ministers received first hand information from the scientists. The moment I remember best, is when the Algerian Minister for the Environment, dressed in full Antarctic outfit, asked questions comparing the ice desert to the sand desert. To witness a one-off meeting between scientists and policymakers in 10 degrees C below zero and a freezing Antarctic summer wind, was an experience that gave me hope for the future.

On my way home I stopped over in London. The driver of my black cab was very talkative. I told him I had been to Antarctica, and he exclaimed: "Oh, Antarctica, I just watched the news on TV. There was a base where a climate meeting was held and then everyone left, only six people stayed behind!"

"That's exactly where I have been," I told him. "I caught the last flight out of the continent before the winter sets in." He then went on to speaking about climate change. The BBC guys did their job well, I thought to myself. The idea of bringing the media along was to create awareness. And to me, the taxi driver was the icing on the cake of a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

ANTARCTIC ICE ACCOUNTS FOR 91.8 PER CENT OF THE WORLD'S LAND ICE. IF ONE PER CENT OF IT WERE TO MELT, THE WORLD'S OCEANS WOULD RISE APPROXIMATELY 65 CENTIMETRES.